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ABSTRACT

To support young children in bringing all of their resources to bear on constructing meaning from print, teachers must be aware of how children learn, must make use of a variety of learning materials, and must carefully prepare the contextual setting in which children move into reading. Teachers should focus on planning a classroom reading environment that enables children's language and experiences to be brought to bear on constructing meaning. They should familiarize themselves with community resources and create a classroom environment that reflects many aspects of the community. Among the many activities they can introduce are the highlighting of children's names in contextual settings and the recording of children's observations about weather and plants. Activities can be related to children's family experiences, to their television and story reading experiences at home, and to current or seasonal interests. Teachers should also focus on developing purposes for reading that become part of daily living. Many functional classroom routines can show children the usefulness of reading, and opportunities for purposeful writing support the notion of purposeful reading. Teachers should also model reading behavior both by reading stories to children and by showing how reading meets some of their own personal needs. (GT)

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# Young Children Move into Reading Supported by a Classroom Reading Environment

by Richard D. VanDongen

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## Introducing the Author

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# Young Children Move into Reading Supported by a Classroom Reading Environment

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The reading process for beginning readers as well as for fluent readers demands comprehension of what is being read. Comprehending, or making sense, requires active engagement of readers who utilize many more resources than their knowledge of printed language. In fact, through the study of young children's learning (Church, Elkind, Smith), it becomes clear that readers construct and reconstruct meaning as they utilize all the resources they have going for them. These resources include their language and their experiences lived within a cultural setting.

This framework for viewing the reading process in young children moving into reading suggests a broader focus in planning a reading curriculum for young children. Instructional materials, however adequate in emphasizing a sequence of reading skills, are simply not enough. If children are supported in their efforts to bring all of their resources to bear upon constructing meaning, a focus must include attending to knowledge of how children learn, all potential learning materials and the contextual setting in which children move into reading. A prepared classroom reading environment which provides meaningful information and meaningful uses of reading supports young children in constructing and reconstructing their experiential encounters with the reading process. In such a prepared environment, figurative aspects of the reading process (names of letters, sequence of letters, etc.), which may be highlighted in reading instructional materials, become more than meaningless rote activities.

Several perspectives can be utilized in implanting information throughout a contextual setting prepared for nurturing reading. Two such perspectives are highlighted here:

1. If from the earliest encounters with reading children are attempting to construct and reconstruct meaning by utilizing all available resources, then how can the classroom reading environment be planned so that children's language and experiences lived within a cultural setting are brought to bear upon constructing meaning?

2. If young readers are to construct their experiences with the reading process into a view that reading is a meaningful, functional activity for human beings to engage in, then what opportunities are available for developing purposeful reading needs which become part of daily living?

## *Young Readers Constructing Meaning*

There are many dimensions in preparing a classroom reading environment which supports children in utilizing their language and life experiences to bear upon construction/reconstructing meaning out of the information available in learning materials while they are purposefully engaging in the reading process. One way to begin preparing such an environment is to assess how the classroom environment will be able to reflect many aspects of the community--culture, language, institutions, services within the community and those impinging from a broader context

upon the community. Those objects which evoke conversation and reflection about personal experiences provide opportunities for children to symbolize their experiences with language and make these experiences available to them as they construct and reconstruct meaning about their world. Such meanings are important resources for children to call upon when they are constructing meaning from what they are reading at any level of competency which they possess.

Teacher observational walks and rides within the community heighten awareness of probable community experiences and resources available to the classroom reading environment. The variety of experiences and resources is surprisingly rich. Even the amount of reading available to children in their daily living is more than first thought. Some teachers have noted for the first time a number of verbal information sources such as signs for streets, traffic, utilities, farm products, items for sale, etc. At least some of the children come into contact with some of these during their activities of daily living. Teachers' awareness and knowledge of community resources encourages planned introduction of objects and graphic symbols into meaningful contextual situations within the classroom environment.

As teachers construct for themselves a reality of the child's world and develop sensitive awareness to children's personal learning, many typical classroom practices take on additional meaning as well as some different dimensions in preparing a classroom reading environment. Children's names are highlighted in contextual settings within the classroom. Names are talked about, they are written down and they are seen by children throughout the day. Opportunities for practicing a child's personal name may be nurtured through the availability of recording tools such as chalk with a small individual chalkboard, a typewriter or printing set, and felt markers with a variety of paper.

Names are seen, recognized and are meaningfully read in child language which has been written down by teachers. This language becomes available to children through a shared experience which has built-in planned opportunities for verbalizing experiences during the process of experiencing.

A wide variety of informational sources may elicit meaningful connections with children's living experiences within a cultural context. Some objects which children bring into the classroom offer opportunities to record informational child language on a paper strip set next to such objects. A small group of children observing, recording and discussing daily weather data provides an opportunity to verbalize events orally and perhaps even graphically.

A representative plant from one school community elicited meaningful connections with previous experience. A branch, on which over a period of time buds opened, flower petals fell and tips of new leaves were observed, became the focus for a number of conversations as children experienced change. Observational data was recorded on paper strips along with the verbalized statements of a few children. Related pictures, charts or posters provided another dimension of connecting living experiences with a symbolization somewhat less removed from reality than that of printed language. Informational books, story books and poems were attractively displayed and conspicuously used in relation to the plant. These reading materials now had embedded in their use opportunities for children to bring their verbalized experiences to bear upon constructing meaning in what they read or in what is read to them.

Human resources of the community offer connections for children's general living experiences with their school experiences. Grandparents, parents and other adults who know that their classroom involvement is welcomed serve important functions. A group of children who eagerly look forward to talking with Grandpa and seek out his assistance have added dimensions of experience to a verbal label. A parent who is sought out to

read a story book in a quiet, cozy space is not only providing children with a dimension of human and family relationships but is also providing an inviting setting for experiencing positive feelings about the reading process. Journal writing, charts and conversations about family all contribute to bringing the child's personal experiences to bear upon constructing meaning about such concepts when they appear in written form in stories.

Teacher awareness of what television and story reading experiences children are having at home are resources for enriching the classroom reading environment and teacher response to children's learning. Certain content may be known to have been experienced at some level of meaning through television. A school librarian was able to anticipate a group of young children searching for monster books because of knowledge of a television event. One teacher wrote personal notes to a group of children inviting them to bring a favorite book from home to read to the teacher or for the teacher to read to them. The written invitation provided the young children a need for reading while the books brought to class provided the teacher with more knowledge about the children's story reading experiences.

While a wide variety of informational sources have been suggested as readily available for evoking verbalization of experiences, new experiences must also be introduced into the classroom reading environment. As these new events are experienced and verbalized, they may eventually be utilized in reading; for the reading process demands the constructing of meaning which is influenced by children's constructing/reconstructing experiences and reality.

Planning for ongoing experiencing and introducing new experiences to build upon past experiences is therefore necessary. Short community walks with a small group of children provide teachers with opportunities to mediate experiences of the children, focus their observations and promote conversation about plants, stores, weather, sports, etc. A brisk February morning provoked a conversation about wind which led to views about which kites were best for purchasing this spring. Plastic kites were determined to be far superior. An observant adult walking with this particular group was able to raise a few questions about the wind; its easterly direction from the nearby snowy mountains might account for the coldness on this particular morning. Several story books came to mind which might be appropriate for story reading later in the morning. The interest of several children was such that a kite-making experience could be introduced. A simple chart for constructing a sturdy kite out of a brown grocery sack might spark a comparison with the plastic kite material.

Another teacher introduced experiences with mail and letter writing near Valentine's Day.. Each day, a committee of five children worked on preparing a note to be mailed to their parents. On the fifth day, the class visited the post office substation near their school. There was much conversation about their trip and the mailing of their letters to their homes. An old leather mail bag, postmarked envelopes, stamps and an ink pad with a variety of rubber stamps used at the post office were brought back into the classroom where a post office area provided the continuing verbalizing of the post office experience. A collection of related story and informational books was introduced; these provided reading opportunities in addition to the popular rubber stamped messages now being created by the children using the rubber stamps which had been brought from the post office.

*Constructing a View that Reading is a Meaningful, Functional Activity*

If children are to construct a personal view of reading which tells them that reading is a meaningful, functional activity, involvement and interaction with an environment which sustains needs for

reading must be carefully planned. Opportunities for children to behave as readers at any level of competency which they have provide criteria for creating and evaluating a rich reading environment.

There are functional routines which offer potential for engaging children in the usefulness of the reading process. Name cards which are placed in an attendance chart, a chart which limits a work area to five people or a chart indicating participation in daily routines, support the notion that reading is useful and purposeful. Likewise, charts of the day's schedule, caring for classroom animals, snack menus and labels for storage and the availability of materials suggest functional uses of reading. Space for notices encourages communicating events in the classroom to others. It provides a need to check written symbols for purposes of knowing what is taking place and what other small groups are doing. Display space provides opportunities for labeling and writing down thoughts of children as they express notions about their work being displayed; these written statements nurture purposeful, personal reading behavior. Such reading behavior suggests that we as human beings use reading for functional purposes in our daily lives of getting on about our activities.

Opportunities for purposeful writing support the notion of purposeful reading. Children who have rich opportunities to explore print via a typewriter or a variety of printing blocks which can be inked by using a rubber stamp ink pad can construct/reconstruct notions of letters and the potential significance which these symbols may eventually hold. Recording observations in some printed form at whatever level of facility allows children to behave like readers; particularly if there are adult models who are seen making lists for their own needs in planning and organizing. Journal writing, whether it is copied from a dictated sentence on the chalkboard or at a later stage when children attempt to write their own thoughts, provides another opportunity for perceiving reading as an important, functional process for communicating.

The teacher's role as a model of a person who can read and does read must be planned to be clearly visible within a classroom reading environment. Two dimensions are emphasized:

1. The reading of stories to children

2. Modeling reading for own personal needs in order to function in daily living

While teachers read stories to children, they are models of reading behavior. They are behaving as readers who are effectively and successfully engaged in the reading process. Enthusiasm for being intellectually engaged with the story is clearly observed and felt by the group of active listeners. An important characteristic of the reading process used by fluent readers, prediction, is meaningfully highlighted as children become increasingly familiar with story content as well as past experiences with story form while they actively listen to the story.

Throughout daily living in classrooms, the adult models purposefully demonstrate meeting some of their personal needs by employing reading behaviors. Teachers are observed writing notes of classroom observations which are used in future planning. Children tune in to the functional uses when teachers mediate what they are doing: "I am writing a note about the rhymes you were sharing this morning so that I can remind myself to check in the library for a book which I recall uses the same rhyme in a story." Likewise, a small group planning session on a proposed activity is purposefully aided by listing those materials and tools which will need to be available. Charting such a list highlights a functional purpose of reading.

Adults who are seen reading for their own personal need for information or for enjoyment are modeling that reading as part of daily living. Teachers responding

to cues of children are constantly seeking our content information which while furthering their own learning is utilized in their planning for providing opportunities for children to further their learning as well. Such seeking out of information is visible to children. One teacher responded in this meaningful interchange: "I don't know what type of seashell Jenny brought to school this morning. Maybe we could find out by examining a few books about seashells." Another teacher responded: "We've added a new type of nails to those available in the construction area. I found in this book that they are called finishing nails."

Some classrooms which utilize a sustained silent reading period provide at least one opportunity for adult models reading their own self-selected books for personal satisfaction and enjoyment. Other moments of such reading behavior may arise in meaningful contextual situations. Sharing a short descriptive passage or a poem which evoked beauty of language and thought within the reader provides children with insights into the exciting human response to the use of language or to a particular thought stated in a fresh, exhilarating way.

## *A Broader Focus*

Young children who hold rich resources within themselves to engage in the process of constructing meaning out of what they read in print and who early in their lives perceive the reading process as a purposeful, useful activity, can move into reading with exhilaration and positive attitudes about life-long learning. Such movement will not occur in a sterile environment; it must be supported by the creative resources of aware teachers who carefully construct rich classroom reading environments.

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Richard Van Dongen is a member of the faculty at the College of Education, Department of Elementary Education, University of New Mexico at Albuquerque. Here he is involved with undergraduate teacher education, the graduate program and a reading laboratory program. His interests include children's reading and literature. This past summer he team taught a class at the University with a faculty member from Fine Arts integrating music with reading and language.

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